

Beyond the 2008 Great Recession: Economic factors and electoral support for the radical left in Europe

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Abstract

One of the most striking political developments occurring during the Great Recession has been the growth of the radical left in some European countries. Though the literature is far from conclusive, it has generally been argued that the economy is not a main reason driving people's support for non-mainstream parties (particularly the Greens and the radical right). In this article, we contend that this is not the case for radical left parties, which despite pursuing other agendas do still compete very strongly on economic issues. Using individual-level data for 56 elections taking place between 1996 and 2016 in 15 European countries we find a positive effect of unemployment on support for radical left parties, and only very weak evidence that this effect depends on voters' ideology or whether the mainstream left (Social Democrats) is in office. We conclude that unemployment enables the radical left to increase its support regardless of the political context, but does not significantly change by itself the ideological makeup of its electorate.

The electoral growth of radical left parties (RLPs) in a number of European countries is one of the most striking political developments taking place after the 2008 Great Recession. At first sight, the ascent of Syriza to the Greek government and the electoral rise of *Podemos* in Spain could be perceived as heralding a new era of increased radical left support in Europe. A crisis of the magnitude of the 2008 one has made some think that an increase in left support was to be expected (Bermeo and Bartels 2014: 21). Moreover, some notorious radical-left politicians have themselves linked the growth of their parties during the post-2008 years to the emergence of a more promising socio-political context due to the strains of the Great Recession (Iglesias 2015).

To be sure, the electoral development of RLPs during the financial crisis has not been uniform. The radical left's electoral support has indeed increased in many countries across Europe after the recession, and very significantly so in Greece and Spain, but in other cases such as the Netherlands and Norway support for this party family has actually decreased substantially in the same period of time. Nevertheless, cases of extraordinary growth during the financial crisis have usually come hand in hand with remarkably high jobless rates, which raises a more general question: beyond the 2008 crisis, do bad economic conditions positively affect support for RLPs?

Despite it being one of the most studied topics in political science, the relationship between the economy and the vote has not produced clear and uncontested evidence so far (Kriesi 2012). It is fair to say that the evidence regarding the individual-level effect of economic changes on incumbent punishment and reward seems robust (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; Duch and Stevenson 2008). However, the extent to which economic voting prevails has been shown to be varying and conditional (van der Brug et al. 2007; Duch and Stevenson 2008), and research into the kind of parties that voters decide to support when dissatisfied with the incumbent's economic performance is far from exhaustive (Kriesi 2012: 519). Moreover, while the effect of economic conditions has been clearly theorized for mainstream parties, little is still known about how non-mainstream parties might be affected by them. The literature on Green and radical right parties is inconclusive, with many studies showing economic conditions to exert a very limited impact on these parties' electoral success (Arzheimer 2017, Müller-Rommel 1998). On the other hand, research on the effect of economic conditions on the radical left's vote is certainly very scarce.

This article contributes to this area of research by focusing on whether, and under what conditions, the electoral support of RLPs in Europe is affected by the evolution of the national economy. We therefore address the following research questions: To what extent does the economy affect the radical left's electoral support? And how is that influence exerted? We contend that there are good reasons to think RLPs may benefit from bad economic conditions. Unlike other non-mainstream parties, economic issues such as unemployment and redistribution are at the very heart of RLPs' discourse. We therefore argue that bad economic conditions, and particularly increases in unemployment, create a favorable context for these parties to attract more voters. In addition, we hypothesize that the effect of unemployment might be mediated by other factors such as voters' left-right ideological position and whether the mainstream left held office before the election. Our findings show that rising unemployment is associated with a higher probability to vote for RLPs, but that this probability increases at a similar rate for all types of voters irrespective of their ideological leaning. Moreover, we do not find government composition to play an important role in determining the effect of unemployment on RLPs' vote.

The analysis presented in this article covers elections held between 1996 and 2016 in 15 European countries. We therefore analyze the effect of economic factors on RLPs' support covering a broader period of time than that of the 2008 Great Recession, which enables us to include a diverse range of political and economic contexts. The analysis comprises both aggregate economic indicators for the elections included in the study and individual-level data from national election studies, most of which are part of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project. The particular combination of individual-level and aggregate data, the time span, and the number of countries

analyzed makes this piece of work the most ambitious research so far concerning the relationship between economic conditions and support for RLPs.¹

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we review the literature and develop our working hypotheses. The data and methods employed in the analysis are then introduced in section three, and results are presented in section four. Finally, the concluding section discusses the implications of our findings.

The electoral effects of economic factors

In its most widely accepted formulation, economic voting theory states that the state of the economy affects the electoral support for incumbent parties, and that government parties are punished for negative economic outcomes and rewarded for positive performance (see, among many others, Kramer 1971, Fiorina 1981, Lewis-Beck 1988, Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000, Duch and Stevenson 2008). By focusing on the incumbent's fate, many economic voting models have overlooked the fact that once voters have decided to punish the government, they must make up their minds regarding which opposition party they will support with their vote –if they decide to turn out at all (Kriesi 2012). It has been argued that perceived economic policy competence may grant opposition parties the ability to capture groups of voters dissatisfied with the incumbent's performance (Duch and Stevenson 2008, Bélanger and Nadeau 2014). Voters may then use elections as both sanctioning mechanisms for bad economic performance and selection mechanisms to choose the 'good economic types' (Banks

¹ In contrast, March and Rommerskirchen (2015), and Hernández and Kriesi (2015) rely on aggregate data. Gittersová et al. (2016) also use aggregate data and focus on the effect of austerity policies on niche parties' support, but some of their analyses show a positive effect of unemployment (which they introduce as a control variable) on support for what they call "left niche" parties.

and Sundaram 1993, Fearon 1999). However, it is not clear how this would affect radical parties, most of which lack considerable experience in government.

In Schlozman and Verba's (1979: 349) view, unemployment has very limited effects on the adoption of radical political positions by the public. This is consistent with the wider literature on non-mainstream parties, where a direct link between the electoral success of such parties and poor economic conditions has not been clearly established. Findings regarding radical right parties are mixed, with some studies showing a strong positive association between bad economic conditions and radical right success (e.g. Arzheimer 2009; Jackman and Volpert 1996) and many others showing either a negative or a non-significant relationship (e.g. Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Coffé, Heyndels and Vermeir 2007; Eatwell 2000; Jesuit and Mahler 2004; Knigge 1998).² Similarly, although the literature about Green parties is much sparser, it has generally been suggested that their electoral support is not positively affected by bad economic conditions either (Müller-Rommel 1998). Regarding specifically RLPs, the evidence using individual-level data is virtually non-existent, but March and Rommerskirchen (2015) found, using aggregate data for the period 1990-2008, that unemployment had a significant and positive effect on the radical left's vote share, although other economic variables such as GDP did not. Also using aggregate data, Hernández and Kriesi (2015) found that the new parties of the populist radical left (and right) benefitted electorally in those countries that were hit hardest by the Great Recession.

From a theoretical perspective, there are good reasons to think RLPs may directly benefit from bad economic conditions. Unlike radical right and Green parties, which

² Others, like Givens (2005), find a positive and statistically significant correlation between unemployment and radical right support in some countries, but not in others.

tend to focus on non-economic issues (Mudde, 2007; Wagner 2012), issues such as unemployment and redistribution play a central role in the discourse of the radical left, even for those parties that have adopted a new left agenda based on socio-cultural cosmopolitan/libertarian values (Gomez et al. 2016). Not only do RLPs emphasize economic issues significantly more than any other party (Rovny 2012), but they also adopt more extreme positions than their mainstream counterparts – a strategy that helps smaller parties enjoy the benefits of policy differentiation and issue ownership (Wagner 2012). While economic policy competence may be argued to disadvantage parties that lack enough government experience, that does not mean such parties cannot benefit from issue ownership at all. Issue ownership is also a matter of appearing more ‘sincere and committed’ than other parties to doing something about a particular issue (Petrocik 1996: 826). Parties can therefore be associated with certain economic issues regardless of whether other parties are perceived to be more economically competent, and this has been shown to benefit parties electorally when the issue that they are associated with becomes more salient (Walgrave et al. 2012; Lachat 2014).

Given that the salience of economic issues rises significantly with unemployment (Singer 2011), it is easy to see how RLPs, which emphasize economic concerns so strongly, may particularly benefit from a bad economy. Indeed, certain groups of voters may find the radical left’s strong and longstanding interest in unemployment, inequality and redistribution to be particularly attractive at a time when jobs are being lost. Higher unemployment rates will, therefore, draw more voters towards RLPs than it is the case under good economic conditions.³ We may then expect that:

³ In fact, March and Rommerskirchen (2015) found a relation between unemployment and radical left vote using only aggregate data.

H1: Radical left parties will benefit from poor economic performance, particularly rising levels of unemployment

So far, we have set out the reasons why we believe higher unemployment might lead more voters to support RLPs. However, it is possible that unemployment *per se* is not strong enough a reason to throw voters into the arms of the radical left. Many scholars have pointed out that the effect of the economy on the vote is contingent, and that it can be moderated or strengthened by several contextual (political and institutional) and individual factors (Powell and Whitten 1995; Bengtsson 2004; van der Brug et al. 2007; Bartels 2014; Kayser 2014). Indeed, voters who are concerned with rising unemployment may decide to take different courses of action. For example, some studies have suggested that economic crises favor right-wing parties, which are trusted to fix the economy during downturns, whereas progressive parties are trusted to govern the expansion when the economy grows (see, for example, Durr 1993; Stevenson 2001; Markussen 2008; and Kayser 2009). While this rationale may guide the behavior of particular groups of voters, those who have strong left-wing views on the economy may find RLPs to be a more appealing option in periods of economic stress.

The argument that unemployment is a necessary but not sufficient condition for voters to support the radical left underpins Hobolt and Tilley's (2016) analysis of challenger parties in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis. Although they do not focus on the radical left,⁴ and their main independent variable intends to capture pocketbook voting, their

⁴ Their operationalization of 'left-wing challenger' includes pirate parties and the Italian Five Star Movement while excluding any radical left party that has ever been in government in the 30 years preceding the Eurozone crisis.

findings suggest that unemployment may only lead those voters who support more redistribution (in other words, those with strong economic left-wing positions) to vote for the non-mainstream left. This reasoning is consistent with the work of other scholars who have stressed that, once voters decide to punish government parties for bad economic conditions, they use not (only) issue competence but also spatial voting (the proximity between voters and party policy positions) to choose an alternative (Kayser 2014; Alvarez et al. 2000; Magalhaes 2012). This entails that different kinds of voters will react differently to the same economic conditions (Duch et al. 2000).

If we follow this logic, it will imply that bad economic conditions favor RLPs by enabling them to attract voters with a radical left-wing ideology who, for any reason, may not vote for them under different circumstances. However, the argument that voters with more extreme ideological positions are more strongly influenced by economic conditions seems a bit puzzling, as it is less ideological individuals who have been found to be less electorally anchored and more open to changing their vote than those with extreme positions (Duch et al. 2000). Similarly, the effect of short-term factors, and particularly the state of the economy, has been shown to be stronger for centrist voters and those with weaker party attachments (Kayser and Wlezien 2011; Torcal 2014).

Admittedly, the radical left's electorate is usually a strongly ideological one, placed around the extreme of the left-right continuum, which means that left-wing ideological radicalism plays an important role in fostering support for RLPs (Ramiro 2016). For RLPs to attract support beyond their traditional base, voters would have to accept crossing the ideological distance that separates them from these parties. While RLPs

are popular among voters with more extreme positions, situations of economic distress might induce significantly larger groups of less ideological voters to support them. Negative economic conditions could therefore contribute to opening the ideological ‘barriers’ that constrain support for RLPs in Europe.

Based on these considerations, one possibility is that economic conditions have a stronger impact on less ideological voters than on voters with more extreme views, whose decisions are allegedly less inflicted by short-term issues. However, as we have already explicated, there are reasons to expect a bad economy to generate incentives for both less ideological voters and voters with a radical left ideology to turn to RLPs, and if both mechanisms were at play there should be no interaction between unemployment and voters’ ideology. We therefore need to test three alternative hypotheses:

H2a. Higher unemployment will increase support for RLPs particularly among voters with a more extreme left-wing ideology

H2b. Higher unemployment will increase support for RLPs particularly among less ideological voters

H2c. Higher unemployment will increase support for RLPs regardless of voters’ ideological radicalism

As argued above, unemployment seems to be a particularly important issue for the radical left. However, although RLPs’ stronger emphasis and more extreme position on this issue may help them stand out among other competitors (Wagner 2012), all left-wing parties focus on unemployment and its consequences to some extent and are,

therefore, likely to be affected by it. As Magalhães (2012: 10) argues, ‘since left-wing governments (...) have a reputation for being more concerned with full employment, failures in the domain of unemployment are likely to be met with greater punishment’.⁵ In a similar vein, van der Brug et al. (2007) find left-wing parties to be more strongly punished for high unemployment rates than other parties. If rising unemployment is particularly important for the prospective voters of left-wing parties as a whole, a situation of increased unemployment might then be more favorable to the radical left when it is combined with a mainstream left-wing (social democratic) incumbent. In such a scenario, voters who supported the incumbent party in the past may feel both compelled to punish it and to look to its left for an alternative. On the contrary, supporting a (usually larger) party of the mainstream left could prove more effective in ousting a right-wing government that is perceived as responsible for a bad economy, which may potentially reduce support for RLPs. Consequently, we can hypothesize that:

H3. Support for RLPs will increase with higher unemployment when a Social Democratic party is in office, but decrease otherwise.

In sum, following previous scholarship on the electoral effects of the economy, we aim to analyze whether economic factors, and particularly unemployment, influence the vote for European RLPs and, if so, under which specific political circumstances. We will also test whether economic factors have a stronger effect for particular groups of voters across the ideological spectrum.

⁵ This modifies Carlsen’s (2000) argument, which suggests that, given the attention left-wing parties pay to unemployment, an increase in its salience due to worsening figures could benefit left-wing parties irrespectively of whether they were in office or in opposition.

Data and methods

Our analyses combine national election surveys included in the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016) project (waves 1-4), aggregate economic indicators and data on government composition.⁶ The CSES data cover elections held between 1996 and 2016, but some of the elections taking place during the last financial crisis are missing. We therefore added another six post-2007 national election surveys (Denmark 2011; Italy 2008 and 2013; and Spain 2011, 2015 and 2016) on the grounds that they were publicly accessible and contained batteries of questions that were compatible with CSES modules.⁷ This enabled us to work with a total number of 56 elections across 15 different countries (see Table 1 below).⁸ The countries included in the sample are those European countries where RLPs gained parliamentary representation in at least one of the elections covered by the data.⁹ RLPs are classified following the academic consensus regarding this party family (March 2011), and so we have included Communist, post-Communist, Social Populist and Left Socialist parties that propose radical changes in the mode in which capitalist market societies and

⁶ In contrast with previous work on RLPs, using individual-level data enables us to avoid well-known problems associated with ecological fallacy.

⁷ These additional surveys include cases of strong support (Spain 2015, 2016), medium levels of support (Denmark 2011, Spain 2011) and low levels of support (Italy 2008, 2013) for the radical left. Results do not change substantially when these elections are excluded.

⁸ The following CSES surveys are not included because one or more of our individual-level controls were missing: Denmark 1998, 2001; Spain 2008; France 2002; and Ireland 2011.

⁹ For the selection of countries and parties we follow the criteria set out by Arzheimer and Carter (2006) for the individual-level study of radical-right voters. As in their case, the inclusion of countries where the radical left has never gained seats in parliament would be necessary in a macro-level study focusing on why some RLPs are successful while others are not, but it would distort results in a study focusing on individual voting decisions..

economies are organized. All the parties group together on the left–right ideological dimension according to diverse expert surveys (March and Rommerskirchen 2015).¹⁰

Table 1. Countries and elections included in the sample.

Country	Election year
Czech Republic	1996, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2013
Denmark	2007, 2011
Finland	2003, 2007, 2011
France	2007, 2012
Germany	1998, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2013
Greece	2009, 2012
Iceland	1999, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2013
Ireland	2002, 2007
Italy	2006, 2008, 2013
Netherlands	1998, 2002, 2006, 2010
Norway	1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013
Portugal	2002, 2005, 2009, 2015
Spain	1996, 2000, 2004, 2011, 2015, 2016
Sweden	1998, 2002, 2006, 2014
Switzerland	1999, 2003, 2007, 2011

Our dependent variable is dichotomous and measures whether respondents voted for a radical left party (1) or not (0) in the most recent national legislative election.¹¹

Regarding the independent variables, government composition is measured by a

¹⁰ The parties included are: Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Czech Republic); SF - Socialist People's Party (until 2012), and EL - Red Green Alliance (Denmark); VAS - Left Alliance (Finland); Left Front (and previously PCF - French Communist Party), New Anticapitalist Party (previously Revolutionary Communist League) and LO - Workers' Struggle (France); Die Linke - The Left (previously PDS - Party of Democratic Socialism) (Germany); Syriza - Coalition of the Radical Left (previously SYN - Progressive Left Coalition), KKE - Communist Party of Greece, and DIMAR - Democratic Left (Greece); SF - Sinn Féin, PBP - People Before Profit Alliance, SP - Socialist Party (Ireland); SEL - Left, Ecology and Freedom, Civil Revolution (and previously PRC - Communist Refoundation, PdCI - Party of the Italian Communists) (Italy); SP - Socialist Party (The Netherlands); CDU - Unitary Democratic Coalition (or PCP - Communist Party of Portugal), BE - Left Bloc (both from Portugal); UP - United We Can (and previously IU - United Left and Podemos - We Can) (Spain); and V - Left Party (Sweden). We included LCR - Revolutionary Communist League and NPA - New Anticapitalist Party in France not only because of their recurrent relevance but also because, although they have not gained representation in the national parliament, they gained representation in the European Parliament. Sinn Féin is a controversial case because it is both social populist and nationalist. Previous research on RLPs has both included (e.g. March 2011; March and Rommerskirchen 2015) and excluded Sinn Féin (e.g. Ramiro 2016; Gomez et al. 2016). Excluding it does, however, not change results in any substantial way.

¹¹ Non-voters are excluded from the analysis. The percentage of respondents voting for a RLP in the sample is 12%.

dichotomous variable indicating whether the Social Democrats were in office (1) or not (0) before the election. We also introduced an additional control indicating whether a RLP was in office (1) or not (0). Unemployment and economic growth (the latter is introduced as a control) are both measured at the election quarter and extracted from Eurostat (2015) and OECD (2015) statistics.¹² We rely on objective economic conditions, not only because our hypotheses refer specifically to the effect of unemployment but also because subjective economic evaluations have been shown to be endogenous to voters' prior political preferences (Anderson et al. 2004; Evans and Anderson 2006).

In addition to those variables, models include a number of individual-level controls: age (continuous); gender (dichotomous variable; 0=female; 1=male); manual worker (dichotomous variable based on occupation; 1>manual worker, 0 = else); education (continuous variable with three values: 1=less than secondary education, 2=secondary education, and 3=post-secondary education); and union membership (dichotomous variable; 1=trade union member, 0=otherwise). Four dummy variables measure employment status: unemployed, student, retired and others outside the labour force (the reference category refers to respondents who are employed). Finally, left-right ideology is captured using three dichotomous variables: left-wing (0-2 on the 11-point left-right scale), centre-left (3-4 on the left-right scale), and non-ideological voters (don't know answers). The reference category is respondents who score 5 or higher on the 11-point left-right scale. Measuring ideology this way enables us to calculate the impact of unemployment on less ideological voters whether these are defined as those

¹² Using unemployment levels in the quarter immediately preceding the election yields similar results (in fact, the significance of the coefficient for unemployment is even higher when the lagged version is used).

with a more moderate ideology, or as those who do not have a clear left-right ideological position.

As our dependent variable is dichotomous, analyses are performed using multilevel logistic regression modelling.¹³ Our data are clustered both within elections and within countries, so models include random intercepts by election (country-year) and country. The number of level 2 units (elections) is 56 and the number of level 3 units (countries) is 15. All aggregate variables are measured at level 2. Random slopes for ideology were introduced in models including cross-level interactions with unemployment.

Results

Table 2 presents the result of a number of multilevel models where aggregate unemployment rates were introduced as independent variable. As mentioned earlier, the dependent variable is voting for a RLP in the most recent general election (individuals who voted for the radical left take up value 1, and those who did not take up value 0). Our first hypothesis (H1) expects higher unemployment rates to increase the probability to vote for RLPs. We have also introduced economic growth as a control in some of the models to make sure effects of unemployment are not due to other factors associated with economic growth in general.

¹³ Models were estimated using second-order PQL RIGLS in MIWin (Charlton et al. 2017). To check the robustness of results, final models were re-estimated using Bayesian modelling, which is computationally intensive but has been shown to be more robust and less prone to bias when applied to multilevel models, even with small numbers of higher-level units (Stegmueller 2013). No substantial differences arose.

Before we focus on the independent variables of interest, it is worth briefly commenting on the results of the individual-level controls (Table 2, Model 1). As expected from previous literature (e.g. Ramiro 2016), the probability to vote for the radical left decreases significantly with age and increases with education. Men and women are, however, similarly likely to vote for this party family. The probability to support a RLP is significantly higher among union members, manual workers and public sector employees. Students and retired voters are somewhat more likely than employed voters to vote for RLPs, whereas voters who are outside the labour force (mainly homemakers, because job seekers are not included in this category) are less likely to do so. As expected, the effect of ideology is very strong indeed: the probability to vote for the radical left increases by more than 37 percentage points for voters with a left-wing ideology (0-2 on the 11-point left-right scale), and by 18 points for those with a centre-left ideology (3-4 on the 11-point left-right scale). Interestingly, the radical left is also able to attract non-ideological voters, which are defined as those who are unable to place themselves on the left-right scale. While non-ideological voters are less likely to vote for RLPs than both left and centre-left voters, they are about 4.7 points more likely to do so than centre and centre-right voters. Finally, it is worth noting that unemployed voters are significantly more likely than their employed counterparts to vote for RLPs. Although the effect is not extremely large (unemployed voters are 2.8 percentage points more likely than employed voters to vote for the radical left), it is consistent with pocketbook voting theory. Moreover, the models control for unemployment rates, so this is capturing the effect of being unemployed regardless of whether unemployment levels are high or low when the election takes place.

Table 2. Unemployment and support for Radical Left Parties. Multilevel logistic regression models.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
<i>Aggregate-level variables</i>			
Unemployment rate	0.087** (0.027)	0.091** (0.027)	
Unemployment (country mean)			0.091 (0.059)
Unemployment (within-country changes)			0.090** (0.029)
GDP growth		0.098 (0.059)	0.098 (0.059)
<i>Individual-level variables</i>			
Age	-0.010** (0.001)	-0.010** (0.001)	-0.010** (0.001)
Gender	-0.002 (0.025)	-0.002 (0.025)	-0.001 (0.024)
Education	0.148** (0.020)	0.148** (0.020)	0.146** (0.020)
Union member	0.206** (0.033)	0.206** (0.033)	0.204** (0.033)
Unemployed	0.370** (0.045)	0.369** (0.045)	0.366** (0.045)
Student	0.234** (0.054)	0.234** (0.054)	0.230** (0.054)
Retired	0.087** (0.043)	0.087** (0.043)	0.086** (0.043)
Other not in labour force	-0.135* (0.053)	-0.135* (0.053)	-0.135* (0.053)
Public sector employee	0.216** (0.035)	0.215** (0.035)	0.211** (0.035)
Manual worker	0.076* (0.035)	0.076* (0.035)	0.075* (0.035)
Left ideology	2.970** (0.042)	2.966** (0.042)	2.939** (0.046)
Centre-left ideology	1.764** (0.036)	1.763** (0.036)	1.746** (0.036)
No left-right ideology	0.901** (0.062)	0.901** (0.062)	0.890** (0.062)
Intercept	-4.437** (0.356)	-4.522** (0.361)	-4.502** (0.567)

var(country)	1.002*	1.050*	1.144*
	(0.401)	(0.417)	(0.452)
var(election)	0.280**	0.264**	0.264**
	(0.066)	(0.062)	(0.062)
N individuals	88,794	88,794	88,794
N elections	56	56	56
N countries	15	15	15

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

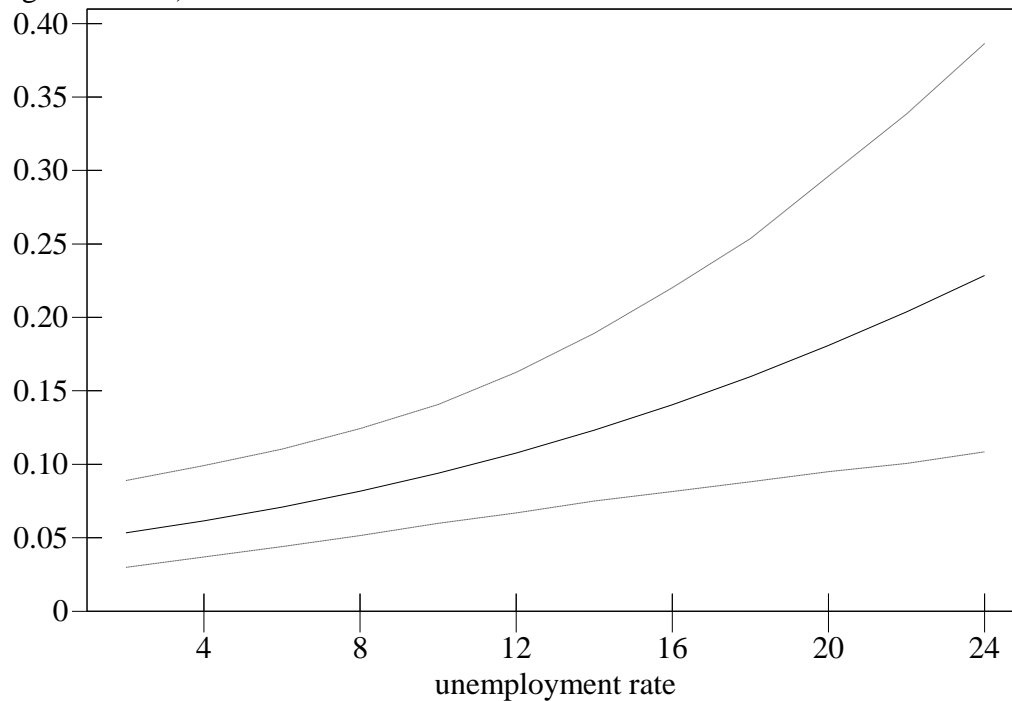
As can also be seen in Table 2, our first hypothesis finds strong support in the data. Unemployment rates are positively associated with a higher probability to support a RLP (models 1 and 2).¹⁴ These findings are consistent with previous research using aggregate data (e.g. March and Rommerskirchen 2015). Drawing on estimates from model 1, Figure 1 shows how the probability to vote for a RLP increases with unemployment. Based on our data, support for RLPs raises from 5.3% when unemployment is low (2%, which is the sample minimum) to 22.8% when unemployment is high (24%, which is the sample maximum). It is important to note that the effect of unemployment is not driven by any particular election: results did not change substantially when we re-estimated the models eliminating the influence of one election at a time.¹⁵ Contrary to our expectations, when we control for economic growth this variable seems to have a small positive effect on voting for RLPs; however, the statistical significance of the coefficient is not high enough (model 2).¹⁶

¹⁴ Controlling for whether the Social Democrats and the Radical Left are in office does not change results.

¹⁵ An examination of the δ betas showed the most influential elections were Greece 2012 (where the radical left was exceptionally successful even for the high levels unemployment) and Spain 2011 (where the radical left got modest results in spite of high unemployment). But, as mentioned, the coefficient for unemployment was still significant ($p < 0.05$ or less) after the individual exclusion of one election at a time. We also checked whether results change substantially after dropping all cases whose exclusion changes the coefficient for unemployment by 10% or more (i.e. Greece 2012; Spain 2004, 2011, 2015; and Italy 2013), but they do not (results are available on request).

¹⁶ The effect is not significant either when growth is introduced on its own. As results do not change much when economic growth is controlled for, this variable has not been included in any of the subsequent models for the sake of parsimony.

Figure 1. Effect of unemployment rates on the probability to vote for a RLP (average marginal effects) with 95% confidence intervals.



Indeed, the effect of unemployment described above may be due to changes in unemployment rates across elections and/or different levels of unemployment across countries. This raises the question: what if the effect of unemployment is only reflecting RLPs' higher success in countries with traditionally higher unemployment levels due to structural factors affecting such countries? In this case, we could not infer that increases in unemployment are likely to lead to more support for the radical left. Following Fairbrother (2014), we separate cross-country and cross-election effects in Model 3. To capture changes between countries, we introduced a variable measuring each country's mean unemployment rate in the elections covered by the data. A second variable was then introduced to capture changes that occur across elections within the same country. This variable was created by calculating the difference between the unemployment figures at the time of the election and the country's mean unemployment

rate. Thus, positive values of this variable indicate unemployment was higher than the average at the time of the election, whereas negative values mean the opposite. As can be seen (model 3), the impact of cross-country differences in unemployment is not statistically different from zero. This stands in stark contrast with cross-election changes in unemployment, which have a positive and statistically significant effect on voting for RLPs, suggesting that it is increases in unemployment across elections and not structural differences between countries that are likely to lead to a higher probability to vote for the radical left.¹⁷

Moving on to Hypothesis 2, the effect of unemployment might not work in the same way for all types of voters. While certain groups of voters may support the radical left regardless of the state of the economy, others may only feel tempted (or mobilised) to do so under conditions of economic stress. Given that different theoretical mechanisms could be at play, three versions of H2 were developed to test whether unemployment affects voters with more extreme left-wing views (H2a) or less ideological voters (H2b) more strongly. Alternatively, unemployment could be expected to have a similar effect on voters regardless of their ideology (H2c). To test these hypotheses, we introduced interactions between unemployment rates and ideology (Models 5-7, Table 3). As the effect of ideology varies across both countries and elections, random slopes at both levels were introduced as well.¹⁸ To facilitate model comparison, we also provide the

¹⁷ In order to test that results are not purely driven by the impact of other non-economic variables that changed over time alongside unemployment and radical left support, we introduced a variable accounting for time. Results (available upon request) did not change substantially. While the coefficient for cross-election changes in unemployment continued to be positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), neither the variable accounting for time nor the one measuring cross-country differences in unemployment differences were significant.

¹⁸ Although the decision to introduce both random slopes is based on empirical tests, the models may seem too demanding. Given that our aggregate variable of interest (unemployment) is measured at the election level, we also tried allowing slopes to vary only across level2 (elections). Results did not change.

results of a baseline model (Model 4 in Table 3) including all the variables used in subsequent models but no interactions.

Table 3. Unemployment and support for Radical Left Parties. Multilevel logistic regression models with interactions.

	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
<i>Aggregate level variables</i>					
Unemployment rate	0.090** (0.028)	0.090** (0.027)	0.093** (0.027)	0.091** (0.028)	0.109** (0.037)
Socialdemocrats in Gov t-1	-0.0919 (0.188)	-0.130 (0.176)	-0.165 (0.179)	-0.0960 (0.183)	0.152 (0.350)
RLP in Gov t-1	-0.139 (0.319)	-0.151 (0.298)	-0.121 (0.304)	-0.115 (0.311)	-0.186 (0.321)
<i>Cross-level interactions</i>					
Unemployment * left ideology		0.002 (0.023)			
Unemployment * centre left ideology			-0.0002 (0.011)		
Unemployment * no ideology				0.001 (0.017)	
Unemployment * SD gov					-0.027 (0.033)
<i>Individual-level variables</i>					
No left-right ideology	0.900** (0.062)	0.887** (0.061)	0.888** (0.062)	0.760** (0.185)	0.899** (0.062)
Centre-left ideology	1.762** (0.036)	1.747** (0.036)	1.751** (0.119)	1.759** (0.036)	1.760** (0.036)
Left ideology	2.964** (0.043)	2.881** (0.239)	2.960** (0.041)	2.956** (0.043)	2.961** (0.043)
Age	-0.010** (0.001)	-0.010** (0.001)	-0.010** (0.001)	-0.010** (0.001)	-0.010** (0.001)
Gender	-0.002 (0.025)	-0.008 (0.025)	-0.003 (0.025)	-0.001 (0.025)	-0.002 (0.025)
Education	0.148** (0.020)	0.140** (0.020)	0.141** (0.020)	0.146** (0.020)	0.147** (0.020)
Union member	0.205** (0.033)	0.211** (0.033)	0.207** (0.033)	0.206** (0.033)	0.205** (0.033)
Unemployed	0.370** (0.045)	0.341** (0.045)	0.368** (0.045)	0.367** (0.045)	0.369** (0.045)

Student	0.233** (0.054)	0.230** (0.054)	0.224** (0.054)	0.233** (0.054)	0.233** (0.054)
Retired	0.0870* (0.043)	0.0652 (0.043)	0.0843 (0.043)	0.0872* (0.043)	0.0867* (0.043)
Other not in labour force	-0.135* (0.053)	-0.125* (0.053)	-0.138** (0.053)	-0.133* (0.053)	-0.135* (0.053)
Public sector employee	0.215** (0.035)	0.219** (0.035)	0.212** (0.035)	0.215** (0.035)	0.215** (0.035)
Manual worker	0.076* (0.036)	0.070* (0.035)	0.078* (0.035)	0.075* (0.035)	0.076* (0.035)
Intercept	-4.411** (0.360)	-4.336** (0.339)	-4.390** (0.344)	-4.403** (0.357)	-4.563** (0.412)
var(country)	1.006* (0.404)	0.882* (0.357)	0.901* (0.370)	0.991* (0.398)	1.067* (0.426)
var(country) _{left}		0.212 (0.118)			
var(country) _{cenleft}			0.028 (0.027)		
var(country) _{noideology}				0.038 (0.057)	
var(election)	0.290** (0.068)	0.248** (0.061)	0.334** (0.079)	0.282** (0.067)	0.285** (0.067)
var(election) _{left}		0.279** (0.076)			
var(election) _{cenleft}			0.103** (0.034)		
var(election) _{noideology}				0.126 (0.078)	
N individuals	88,794	88,794	88,794	88,794	88,794
N elections	56	56	56	56	56
N countries	15	15	15	15	15

Standard errors in parentheses. Covariances between random slopes and random intercepts have been omitted but are available upon request.

* p<.05, ** p<0.01

We start out by testing H2a, for which an interaction between left-wing ideology and unemployment was introduced. As can be seen (Table 3, model 5) the interaction is not statistically significant, suggesting that unemployment effects are not stronger among those who have a more extreme left-wing ideology. Thus, results provide very weak support for this version of the hypothesis. H2b focuses on less ideological voters, who

are expected to be more strongly influenced by unemployment. Since there are different ways in which the term 'less ideological' can be interpreted, two alternative equations were modelled. The first one (model 6) focuses on voters who are left-wing but have a more moderate ideology (centre-left voters). The second one (model 7) focuses on those voters who are not comfortable placing themselves on the left-right ideological continuum. As can be seen, the interaction with unemployment is not significant in either model, which provides very weak support for H2b. Unemployment increases the probability to vote for the radical left but, consistently with H2c, it does not enable RLPs to be nearly as attractive for centre-left and non-ideological voters as they are for left-wing voters.

Finally, Hypothesis 3 stated that unemployment might only affect support for RLPs when their mainstream left-wing competitors (i.e. the Social Democrats) are in office. This is because the attribution of responsibilities works differently depending on who is in power. When unemployment is high and the mainstream left is in office, voters may decide to punish the government by switching to a challenger left-wing party. This logic may, however, not be at play when the Social Democrats are in opposition and, therefore, cannot be blamed for a bad economy. To test this hypothesis, model 8 in Table 3 introduces an interaction between unemployment and a binary variable indicating whether the Social Democrats were in office or not before the election. We also control, with another binary variable, for whether the radical left was in office. As can be seen, unemployment does not significantly interact with type of government, suggesting that the radical left benefits from higher unemployment regardless of whether there is a left-wing or a right-wing government. The coefficient measuring whether the radical left was in office previously to the election is not statistically

significant – and neither does it interact with unemployment (not shown). Therefore, results provide extremely weak support for H3.

Conclusion

The question that guided this article was: to what extent, and how, do economic conditions drive support for RLPs? We argued that, unlike other mainstream parties such as the radical right or the greens, RLPs' very strong emphasis on socio-economic issues is likely to increase their appeal when economic concerns become more salient for voters. A scenario of rising unemployment is, therefore, expected to particularly benefit the radical left. Overall, we find strong support for this hypothesis. In those European democracies where a radical left option is present, unemployment is associated with a higher probability to vote for these parties. Using data from 56 elections in 15 European countries, we find that the radical left's support increases by about 17 percentage points when unemployment moves from 2% (sample minimum) to 24% (sample maximum). While economic growth did not seem to have an effect on its own, unemployment clearly did. Our results confirm previous findings in the literature that had used aggregate data regarding the positive effect of higher unemployment rates on the support for radical left in Europe (March and Rommerskirchen 2015; Hernández and Kriesi 2015). Moreover, the effect of unemployment does not seem to be associated with cross-country differences but with changes in unemployment rates across elections. Importantly, this effect adds up to the egotropic effect of being unemployed, which increases the probability to vote for the radical left by 3 percentage points among those who do not have a job.

Unemployment acts as a catalyst for RLPs' support, but it does not enable RLPs to reach across ideological boundaries more decisively. Whether unemployment is high or low, left-wing voters are still about twice as likely as centre-left voters to support a RLP. Given that economic conditions have not been found to be significantly associated with the proportion of voters who hold a radical left ideology (Visser et al. 2014), these findings also speak to the limits of RLPs to broaden their base even under conditions of very high unemployment. To do so, RLPs must rely on something more than just a favourable economic context.

RLPs do not act in the vacuum and must therefore compete for voters with other parties, particularly with their mainstream left-wing counterparts. It, therefore, seems logical that the radical left should benefit the most from unemployment when the mainstream left is in power. However, our findings also suggest that the composition of governments is not an important factor in determining the effects of unemployment on the RLPs' vote. The radical left benefits from high unemployment whether the mainstream left is in power or not. This finding is, indeed, important, because it suggests that the electoral success of RLPs under bad economic conditions is not necessarily the consequence of a disgruntled vote against the mainstream left.

The key, perhaps, is the centrality of economic issues such as unemployment and income redistribution in the radical left's discourse. Although other left-wing parties emphasize similar issues, the fact that RLPs take up more extreme positions might work to their advantage when the salience of these issues increases considerably, as Wagner (2012) suggests with regard to niche parties. Future research on the topic may therefore focus on the performance of RLPs when political competition shifts from economic to

socio-cultural issues. Do RLPs perform less well under such circumstances? And are all RLPs similarly affected by such shifts?

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